BEACON 23

BOUNTY

HUGH HOWEY

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

I live in a tin can out on the edge of sector eight. Not much is supposed to happen here. Ships are supposed to fly by at twenty times the speed of light. My beacon is supposed to keep them safe.

Things don't always go like they're supposed to.

- Beacon 23
  - • 1 •
  - • 2 •
  - • 3 •
  - • 4 •
  - • 5 •
  - • 5 •

Beacon 23
PART THREE: BOUNTY
by Hugh Howey

• 1 •

They say bad things come in threes, but I don't think that's true. I think bad things keep right on coming. They don't stop. They'll never stop. It's just too depressing to keep counting, so we start over after the third bad thing. We hold our breath. We wait. We hope the universe will wait with us.

But then something else bad happens, and with dread and short memories we utter to ourselves, "Okay, that's one," and we brace for what's next.

Something's always next.

I live in a tin can on the edge of sector eight, and my job is to keep bad things from happening. My track record so far is less than stellar. A screensaver on one of my monitors reads *18 Days Since Our Last Accident*. It ticks up by one each morning, so that's progress.

Most ships pass through my sector at twenty times the speed of light, and they leave little more than a ripple on my grav scanner. But near on three weeks ago, some bastards took down my beacon, and a cargo bound for Vega splashed itself across the asteroid field in my back yard. Most of the wreck is still out there—what the pirates and scavengers and souvenir seekers didn't cart off.

I guess if we're counting, that was the first bad thing. The second was a little incident I'd rather not mention, but it involved a talking rock. Okay, it involved me talking to a rock—I'm pretty sure the rock never talked back. Just in case, I drilled a hole straight through the guy and hung him around my neck on a lanyard. Not sure if I did this to make sure the rock was really dead or to keep him close to my ears in case he talks again. Told you I wasn't proud.

The third thing is the reason my body is covered in bruises, cuts, and scrapes right now. It's why my ankle is either sprained or broken and my arm is in a sling. Two days ago, my grav panels started oscillating uncontrollably. Really turns a man's world upside down. And right-side up again. And upside down. And—well, you get the point.

Now I'm a mess and my beacon's a mess. Tools, food packs, spares, all went rattling around in their cubbies and cabinets until they burst forth like possessed demons. Hundreds of items are scattered all over the place, choosing to lie perfectly still now, like they're all exhausted from the pounding they gave me. Taking naps. Waiting for me to tuck them all back in.

Before I do that, I'm wiring up kill switches for the grav generator. I put big red buttons on the ceilings of every living module and ran wires to breakers down in life support. Can't step on the

buttons by accident, but if my tin can gives me the old shake-and-bake again, I can hit one of these instead of trying to get down a ladder while gravity is rag-dolling me. Trying to get down the ladder the last time is what took my arm out of its socket.

I could probably call the incident in and list my wounds, and it'd be enough for NASA to send me home. Problem is, I don't have a home to go to. Some part of me knows I'm here for life. And the way things are going, I reckon that won't be for very long.

I finish the last wire splice on the new kill switches. Even with the floor grates up for access, I have to wiggle back under some of the pipes and conduits to reach the grav generator. Wrapping electrical tape around the splice, I laugh to see the same tape wrapped around one of my fingers. I ran out of bandages, so I resorted to taping up my cuts. The same stuff holds us together, me and my beacon. Hell, most of this place is a modification some previous operator made. It's like a human body at age thirty-five, when not a single original cell is left. All that remains are the memories—the one damn thing we wish we could amputate.

Funny how that works. And funny how easily we forget the good times while the nightmares haunt us. Guess that's a survival mechanism. We're not here to be happy; we're just here to be here. I spend a lot of time wishing I wasn't—but that's my dark secret, and not something I'm going to tell you. I don't even whisper that to my rock.

Three bad things. They come like this, in little clusters for the counting. They're coming for me now.

Ding-Dong.

The first of them arrives with the sound of a door chime.

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Okay, it's not quite a door chime; it's actually a hull proximity alert. But if you ask me, the old alert sounded too much like an air raid siren. Which ain't so bad when it's occasional, but with all the traffic after the cargo crash, it started jangling my nerves. It's the waiting for it to go off that kills me. It's the silent anticipation. Your whole body is tense, lying awake in your sleep sack, eyes wide open, seeing a buddy yell *INCOMING!* before a cloud of red mist blooms where a human once stood. Yeah, it's not the sound of the siren that gets you. It's the lying there, waiting. Listening to the silence. Counting.

I did some digging, figured out where the sound file for the alert was stored, and replaced it with a door chime. Of course, I couldn't

find a door chime in the archives, so I had to record my own. And yeah, I could've made a decent chiming sound with a wrench and some sheet steel, but I got lazy and just said *Ding-Dong* into the mic. Now, when I get a visitor, that's what I hear. Gives me a chuckle. Sometimes, you've just gotta laugh. You just gotta hug your shins, rock back and forth, and laugh.

I wiggle my way out of the crawlspace, scooting along on my shoulder blades, rolling from one to the other, and pushing with my good foot.

Ding-Dong.

That's me.

Ding-Dong.

I'm coming.

I pull myself out of the crawlspace and limp my way through the scattered debris. The climb up the ladder is slow with one hand and a sprained ankle. In the living quarters, I silence the alert using the switch by my sleep sack, then go up another flight into the command module. There's a blast of static from the high frequency radio before a voice cuts in with a transmission.

"*—con 23, this is Sanity's Edge, over."*

I lift the mic with my free hand and wince as a stab of pain shoots across my ribs. Glancing out the nearest porthole, I see a ship hovering three or four klicks away, red and green lights blinking on each wingtip. Long pods with glimmering gold tips hang beneath the wings. Lasers. Pointing at me.

"Beacon 23," I say. "Go ahead, *Sanity*."

Checking the scanners, I see she's registered to a Delphi corporation. The Delphi system is a tax-free zone; a lot of privately owned vessels hail from there, even if they've never touched atmo in Delphi. They just do the bill of sale in orbit and scoot.

"Permission to dock," the pilot radios. "*Official US marshal business."*

I glance back out the porthole. That ain't no marshal boat out there. If she's privately owned, and she's really on marshal business, and she's legally armed, then it can only be one thing: a bounty hunter. Looks like a whiff of excitement has drifted into old sector eight. I squeeze the mic.

"Beacons are NASA-oversight neutral territory," I remind the captain. "By colregs, no arms are allowed on any beacon, nor are military or private security craft allowed to dock without warrant or express permission."

Which is true and all, but what I'm really thinking is that the beacon's a wreck, as am I, and I really don't want visitors. I'm in my white NASA boxer briefs, and putting on a shirt with a bad shoulder is

a pain in the ass. Well, not the ass, exactly, but you know what I mean.

"Beaming the warrant to you now," the radio hisses.

I check my comm screen as the transmission comes through. After a brief scan, my systems tell me the document's legit. There's a twinge in my ribs as I take a deep breath.

"Docking collar Charlie," I say. I reach over and flip on the homing light and energize the locking collar. Then I think of a little white lie. "Uh . . . Captain, I'm under strict quarantine, so please stay aboard. I'll come to you."

There's a pause on the other side.

"Quarantine?" the pilot asks.

"No longer communicable," I assure him—and I feel like I can hear him exhale in relief.

If he checks the colreg logs, he'll see that I'm not exactly lying. I *am* under quarantine. What the logs won't say is that it was a computer virus, and that the victim was my beacon. Strange the lengths I'll go to in order to keep people away from me, considering how lonely I feel most of the time. I guess that's the strange torment I suffer: dying for company, for someone to talk to, but it's never the right someone who shows. And an unwelcome presence is far worse than miserable silence.

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I head down three sets of ladders to the lock hub, the sling over my arm making the trip take longer than usual. Any weight on the ball of my left foot makes my ankle cry out, so I try to get my heel deep on the rungs, which just means repeatedly banging my shin. I considered going without gravity for a while, but one look at all the crap strewn everywhere and I imagine it floating and bouncing around. No thanks.

In fact, the wreck of my beacon comes into stark relief with the prospect of someone docking up. In addition to the stuff everywhere, I've got open access panels leading down into mechanical spaces and wires strung all over from my makeshift repairs. My walk suit is crumpled up in the middle of the docking module, and the door to the lifeboat is wide open. For a while there, I was wearing the suit all the time and sleeping in the lifeboat, but I stopped doing both those things after the shipwreck debris bombarding my beacon died down. Besides, I'm back to not sleeping much anyway.

I wait by the airlock for the pilot to secure his ship. Sniffing the air, I have this bad feeling that, despite the herculean effort from the

air scrubbers and NASA's PineFresh scenting system, the entire facility reeks of a college dorm room, midsummer, after an egg fight, with two dead skunks under a pile of soiled laundry. I breathe into my palm and sniff. Whatever olfactory sense I had died months ago. That's good for me, bad for visitors.

A loud thump against the hull lets me know that the ship has arrived and that the pilot is a three on a scale of ten when it comes to jockeying a flight stick. If he's making a living collecting bounties, that probably means he's more of a terrestrial threat. More of a sleuth-and-taser kinda guy. This guess is vindicated once I've keyed my side of the airlock and he's keyed his. The bounty hunter on the other side is straight out of one of those true-life holos where people repo your shit or haul you back to jail from some remote moon hideout.

His hair is in dreadlocks. His beard is long, and it's knotted with bits of string so that it juts out in little clumps. There's an unlit cigar between his teeth and mirrored shades wrapping his face. He's got a bandana around his neck, another on his bicep, and one tied around each knee. His flightsuit is studded with bulging pockets, and even standing perfectly still, he jangles. I imagine he must keep the grav on his ship at a 0.7 to be able to stand all that nonsense. He has guns strapped everywhere, and an honest-to-goodness bandolier of large brass shells and grenades is draped across his chest like some warlord beauty contestant sash. What sounds vaguely like a dog yips somewhere from within the depths of his ship.

"Mitch," the bounty hunter says, reaching out his hand with a jangle and clatter. "Mitch O'Shea." We do that awkward arm-in-sling handshake where I extend my left hand, turn it sideways, and we go pinkie-to-thumb. He looks me up and down. "What happened to you?"

I realize I'm standing there in my boxers, barefoot, covered in bruises and duct tape. I dimly care.

"Gravity genset went on the fritz," I say. "Started oscillating. Uncontrollably."

The bounty hunter lowers his shades and narrows his eyes at me, almost like he has some truth-detecting superpower and is boring it into my brain. I glance up at the ceiling, and he glances with me. I glance down at the floor, and he does the same. We look up again. Then down.

"Yeah," I say. "About like that."

"No shit?"

I point to my slinged arm. "You ever hear it hurts worse to put a shoulder back in than it does to knock it out?"

He nods.

"Complete crap. Feels so good going back in. Like popping your knuckles. You should try it."

“I’ll take your word for it.” He glances at my arm, at my attire, and then pushes his glasses back over his eyes. When he fishes a tablet from a pouch in the back of his flightsuit, I see that the small talk is over. Down to business. He holds the tablet out to me; it has a warrant displayed on the screen. I study a blurry image of a woman with short-cropped hair and an angry scowl. There’s all kinds of small text about what the government wants done with her and how much they’ll pay, but I just see the image. The tablet is taken back before I’m ready to let go of it.

“Have you seen her?” O’Shea asks.

“Nope,” I say.

“You sure?” he asks.

“Positive.”

O’Shea lowers his glasses and narrows his eyes at me again. I widen mine on purpose, throwing the blinds open, letting him really stare inside. Somewhere in his ship, an animal whimpers. If this guy could really see my thoughts, he’d probably be whimpering too.

The glasses go back up. I fight the urge to laugh out loud at this guy. There’s a chance, I realize, that all his gear came from a surplus store and he’s really new at this. Impossible to tell. In the army, rookies spent a lot of time charring their gear over trench fires and smearing their helmets with mud to fit in. The vets, meanwhile, spent their time trying to keep their shit maintained in order to stay alive. I sniff the air, looking for a scent of gun oil or WD-60 to get a handle on which sort of person Mitch O’Shea is. Unfortunately, due to the nature of my living quarters, my olfactory sense is stunted.

“Okay, well, I’ll need all ship scans for the last couple weeks,” O’Shea says. “Plus all radio logs.”

“Not many places to hide out here,” I say.

Mitch stares at me. At least, I assume he’s staring at me behind those glasses.

“There’s good reason to suspect this fugitive came through here,” he says. “I’ll also need to do some scans of my own, poke around a bit, but I want to warn you that this person is very dangerous—”

I say, “*Ding-Dong*,” cutting O’Shea off.

Well, a recording of my voice from two weeks ago does that. There’s another ship arriving in-system. I glance up the ladders, dreading the three-flight climb. It’s fifty-six rungs to the command level. Yes, I’ve been counting.

“Was that someone saying ‘ding-dong’?” O’Shea asks. He points his unlit cigar at the ceiling.

I clear my throat. Beacons aren’t meant for co-habitating. It feels like the NASA techs just left, and now I’ve got this guy seeing me in my briefs, nosing my dirty laundry, and hearing what I do to pass the

time.

"You mind if I look out your canopy?" I ask. "Just to see who that is. It's a long climb up with a busted wing." I indicate the sling.

Mitch hesitates. Then he stands aside with a jingle and a jangle. "Don't touch anything," he says. "Cockpit's this way."

Yeah, toward the front of the ship, I nearly say sarcastically. From the bump he gave the locking collar, I'm pretty sure I've got more flight time than this bounty hunter does. But I keep it to myself and follow him toward the cockpit. We pass through what looks like a holding pen—gray bars run from floor to ceiling. There's an animal in one of the pens, drinking out of a toilet.

"Cricket, stop that. No. Bad girl."

The animal pulls its head out and turns to look at its master, water dribbling from its jowls. Looks like a cross between a dog and a leopard. Probably not even a little bit of either. Definitely alien. The animal goes back to slurping.

"Hardened criminal?" I ask, jabbing my thumb at the cell.

O'Shea laughs. "Cricket? Naw, I just put her away so she don't maul you."

I look back at the animal. She's the size of the cougars we'd see now and then in the backwoods of Tennessee. Might be deadly, but I doubt it. Seems like a pushover, drinking out of that toilet and looking at us with that blank expression.

I follow O'Shea through a narrow hall. There's an open door to a bunkroom with an unmade bed; just beyond that are some grated lockers with guns inside and big padlocks on the latches. We squeeze past these into the tight cockpit, and O'Shea pulls up his system scanner. I peer out the porthole to see another dark-hulled ship approaching the beacon.

"Goddamn," O'Shea says.

"You got an ID on that?" I ask. The ship looks vaguely military. I don't like things that look vaguely military. I hate the things that look *really* military. With me, it's like a sliding scale of hate versus appearance with some direct correlation.

"Don't need an ID," he says, disgust dripping from his voice. He reaches across me for the HF mic. Squeezing the transmit button, he glares plasma rounds up through the canopy. "You know putting hull trackers on a bounty ship is a federal violation, right, asshole?"

The radio hisses a response: *"You think I need a hull tracker to sniff you down, you filthy runt of a raped pig?"*

I'm beginning to suspect these two know each other. I watch this new ship expel little volcano blasts of air as it orients itself to face us.

"He's not going to shoot us, is he?" I ask.

"Nah, Vlad here is a *chickenshit*."

I notice O'Shea squeezes the mic and raises his voice as he says this last bit.

"What did he mean by a 'raped pig'?" I ask.

O'Shea shrugs. "He's not so bright. Stay away from him."

I look Mitch O'Shea up and down and consider what it might mean for this guy to label someone else "not bright." Thoughts of black holes come to mind.

The HF squawks again. I adjust the squelch, since Mitch doesn't seem to care to. Or maybe doesn't know how. *"Beacon 23, this is Vladimir Bostokov on federal marshal duty. Requesting docking procedures. I have a warrant. Over."*

"Fuck him," Mitch says, with all the disgust of a man with a shitload of debt who feels very close to a large pile of credits and sees another man eyeing that same pile.

"I've got to let him," I say, waving Mitch for the mic.

"You could claim a section 12b, extenuating circumstances related to injury in the line of duty." He nods at my sling, all the bandages over my little cuts and scrapes, and the array of purple splotches.

"*Now* you tell me," I say. I key the mic to radio this Vlad character. "This is the operator of Beacon 23. Locking collar Bravo. I'm under quarantine, so please stay aboard. Over."

"*Copy,*" Vlad says.

And beside me, Mitch O'Shea rattles in annoyance.

• 2 •

"Look, I don't really want *either* of you on my beacon," I tell O'Shea as we wait by airlock Bravo. "You've both got warrants for scans, so you'll both get them. Then you'll get the hell off my station."

"I'm telling you, this guy's an asshole," O'Shea warns.

The light above the airlock goes green, signaling the second bounty hunter's ship has a good magnetic seal and that the atmo on the other side is clean. I didn't even hear the hull make contact, the landing was so soft. I glance at O'Shea, but he's fuming and oblivious. Vlad might be an asshole, I want to say, but he's a damn good pilot.

I key open the airlock. A bewildering sight awaits. There's a man in a tuxedo on the other side of the door.

"Vladimir Morrow Rostokov," the man says, extending his hand to me.

I accept his hand with my inverted left. Before I can introduce myself, Vlad shoots his colleague a nasty look. "Mitchell," he says, in his thick accent.

O'Shea says nothing in return.

Vlad reaches inside his jacket pocket and pulls out a printed sheet of paper. He unfolds it, and I can see it's the same bounty O'Shea showed me.

"What do to your arm?" Vlad says, leaving out a non-vital word in there somewhere.

"Grav panel issues," I say. He looks me up and down in my boxers and bandages, seems to be waiting for more than this. "Fluctuations," I tell him. "Polarity issues. Went for a bounce or two."

Vlad shrugs. I gesture toward the printed flyer. "And no, I've never seen her."

"Here," Vlad says, handing me the flyer anyway. "Keep for you."

Perhaps too eagerly, I accept the flyer and fold it back up, sticking it in the waistband of my boxers.

"Ding-Dong," I hear myself say.

"What now?" I ask.

The two bounty hunters stare at one another.

"You mind?" I point into Vlad's ship. He shrugs, and I step past him and enter what looks more like a swanky hotel than a star cruiser. Everything is large clean slabs in that pre-post-second-modern style. Some black and white photos hang on the walls, mostly alien portraits either staring right at the camera or off to the side. They almost look like mug shots, but artfully done. A wet bar in one corner gleams with shiny bottles of all shapes, most of them half-full of a myriad shades of amber.

Vlad waves me forward, leading us past transparent doors that look in on small posh rooms. In one of these rooms, a young man looks up from a bunk, his hands shackled in iron fists. I realize these rooms are cells. I'd kill to live in one. They look amazing.

Behind us, I hear O'Shea jangling and following along. He grumbles enviously about something or other. Vlad tells him to not touch that.

I duck my head and enter a meticulously kept cockpit. You can smell the leather. The place is so nice that even my nose is perking up. O'Shea and Vlad crowd in beside me, and all three of us peer out the canopy.

"I don't like this," O'Shea says.

"Me either," says Vlad.

In the distance, my voice whispers, "*Ding-Dong*."

"Look, it's not my favorite day this week," I tell the two bounty hunters. "And yesterday, I cleaned the shitter."

It takes me a moment to find the new arrival, to see what the bounty hunters are seeing. This third ship is matte black. It can be picked out only by the background stars it gobbles and shits out as it moves across the constellations. A dim red and green light glows at each wingtip, but probably below legal illumination levels. A white light flashes from the nose of the ship, directed toward my beacon. Pulses of long and short.

I locate the HF on Vlad's dash and pick up the mic without asking. Legally, with the ships docked to my beacon, they're under my command. Warrant or no.

"Won't need that," O'Shea says, squinting up at the ship.

I ignore him and squeeze the mic. "Vessel inbound at beacon 23, state your intentions."

"Won't work," Vlad says. "She no talk."

"Who is that?" I ask the two bounty hunters, who both seem to know something about this ship. "Another friend of yours?"

"I've crossed paths with her once or twice," O'Shea says. And I note the lack of ire in his voice. Maybe even something like respect. "Don't know her name, but she makes the quiet type sound like an afterbooster in atmo."

"Well, surely she listens," I say. I watch the flashes. My Morse is rusty, but the context helps; I get the marshal business bit of her spiel.

"Well, looks like she wants to board. Seeing as I've only got the three lock collars, and my lifeboat ain't moving, you two should clear out. I'll beam all the scans and logs I have to the lot of you, and to anyone else who shows up."

Vlad shrugs. He seems to be okay with this. O'Shea grimaces at me. As we pass back through the ship, O'Shea pulls me aside. He's

holding a few bills of Federation money out to me. “Give me a thirty-minute head start,” he whispers.

I turn to study him. He adds: “For getting here first. And saving you a trip to your radio.”

I take the money and pocket it. O’Shea smiles. The boy in the cell is watching us through his long black bangs, but he returns his gaze to the floor when I glare at him. We follow Vlad back to the beacon, where the two colleagues exchange thin frowns and disappear into their respective ships. Using the keypads by the doors, I close the airlocks on both of them.

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After the two bounty hunters decouple and pull away, I watch through the porthole as the black hull of the third craft comes into view. There’s no seeing inside it, as its canopy and all its portholes are tinted. The ship quickly fills my porthole, and the pilot docks with a very capable nine on the bump-o-meter. I wait for the light to go green, key open the airlock, and find a ninja standing on the other side.

A bit of a derail here to say what a huge fan I was of *Urban Ninja Detroit* growing up. All I ever wanted to be was an urban ninja. My parents got me a costume for Halloween when I was seven or eight, and I kept wearing that getup until the split-toe shoes would barely squeeze onto my feet and the pants rode up above my calves. Because of me, everything in my neighborhood was peppered with holes from throwing stars and blowdarts. Hell, I probably joined the military instead of going to college because of the overdeveloped sense of honor that damn TV show gave me. I’ll also say here that I like to pretend *Urban Ninja L.A.* never existed. *Urban Ninja Chicago* wasn’t so bad. But I digress.

“Lemme guess,” I say to the ninja. “Looking for a certain fugitive?”

The bounty hunter, who is dressed from head to toe in all black, with cowl and goggles and everything, nods. I see that most of the black attire is a mix and match of official Navy reg gear. I recognize much of it, and even know the decade some of it was in service and the field of action in which it was assigned. Someone hit up the surplus store and found a sale.

“Haven’t seen her,” I say.

The bounty hunter pulls out a small tablet and keys something in, I assume to show me the text or to make the tablet speak out loud. I’m sensing that this person *can’t* speak, rather than that she chooses not

to.

"You want the scans," I say.

She nods and wipes the screen with the side of her hand. Starts writing something else.

"And radio logs."

Another nod. And I think I can tell from the movement of shadows across her cowled cheeks that she's smiling.

"No problem," I say. "I've got a quarantine situation here from NASA, so you've got to stay on your ship. I'll beam you the data. You need anything else?"

For some reason, I've always felt the urge to go out of my way for those who ask for the *least*, rather than those who ask the loudest. But she shakes her head.

"Okay. If you'll pull away, I'll go up and get you and your two buddies what you need." I say this, even though I kinda don't want her to go. But I'm embarrassed about how I look and how the beacon looks. My life is all about miserable timing.

Instead of turning back to her ship, the bounty hunter hesitates, like there's something else.

I hazard a guess: "You want a head start, don't you?"

She nods.

I think of all those mornings sitting in front of my TV watching masterless warriors scale glass towers and fight back the hordes of shoguns sent by the evil Tao-Lin Corporation. I have a soft spot for ladies in all black. Probably the real reason I joined the navy.

"You've got it," I say, my free hand dropping to my waistband, where the bills from O'Shea peek out next to a folded bounty flyer. "Good luck on your hunt."

I don't really mean this last. In fact, I feel rather conflicted as the bounty hunter disappears and I work my slow way up the first ladder. It feels like the grav panels have gone on the fritz again, twisting me this way and that. Sometimes you want the good guys to get their man. Sometimes you can't tell who the good guys are.

Up the second ladder, into my living quarters, I silence the proximity alarm again. Then I head up the last ladder into the command pod, and my mind goes back to how bad things seem to come in threes. Three bounty hunters, arriving within moments of each other. Can I count them as three individual bad things and assume my day improves? I decide to.

A voice interrupts my thoughts.

"Those assholes gone?" someone says.

I emerge up the ladder and turn to see a woman sitting in my command chair. She's got a blaster in her hand and a frown splashed across her face.

It's the girl from the bounty flyer.
I never thought I'd see her again.

• 3 •

"Jesus, Scarlett, what the hell are you doing here?"

"Are they gone?"

"Yes, they're gone. They're out there looking for you. What're you doing here?"

I take a step toward her, and the blaster stiffens in her hand. She looks me up and down and smirks at my attire. The wounds across my body don't seem to faze her. She's seen me in worse condition than this. And in fewer clothes.

"What am I doing here?" she asks. "Don't be dense. I came to find you."

"Why? How? And you do realize you brought the badass brigade with you, right?" I nod my head toward the portholes. Scarlett doesn't glance away from me. Instead, she shrugs.

"I needed a ride," she says.

That's when it hits me how she got here. She must've stowed away on one of their ships, then probably tipped them off that she was here. I reckon she had to've been on one of the first two ships, and got out when we were in Vlad's cockpit. I'd wager O'Shea brought her here. Vlad's ship was too neat for hiding.

"Nice blaster," I say, gesturing with my free hand. "I thought we were friends."

I should mention here that I really don't like guns pointed at my head. Not unless I'm the one doing the pointing.

"So you're working for NASA," Scarlett says, as if this answers my question. "Why?"

I let out a sigh. Scarlett never could stand any government agency. Doesn't matter what they do, they aren't to be trusted.

"I needed a job," I say.

"Tell me why you're working for NASA," Scarlett insists.

"Money," I say. "Pension. Job. Dinero."

She raises the blaster. Her voice as well. "Why are you working for NASA?"

I scratch one of the bandages on my arm. They say the itch is a sign of healing. I've been healing for a long damn time.

"I needed to be alone," I whisper.

The blaster wavers. I try to remember the last time I saw Scarlett. In a trench on Gturn, I think. Or one of its moons. A lot of those trenches looked the same.

The blaster lowers a little. She believes me. She should. I told her the truth. I always do, eventually.

"Now please tell me what *you're* doing here," I say. "How'd you

find me?"

Scarlett points the blaster toward one of the portholes. I turn to see the sparkle of debris out there like a billion new stars. And it makes sense. Sometimes bad things really do come in clusters, because one leads to the other. I think about the rock, which I wouldn't have found were it not for the wreck. I think about the wreck I am, which Scarlett wouldn't have found without the accident.

"NASA has to file a report with the Navy when there's a wreck like that," she says. "We've been looking for you for a long time. Your name finally popped up."

"Yeah, well, I've been looking to not be found." I turn back to her. "Can you put the blaster away? Please? I'm not a government stooge."

"If you're working for their pension, you're their stooge."

She says this, but the blaster goes away, back in her holster. In the porthole behind her, I see the flashing lights from one of the ships. "Shit," I say. "I've got to transmit some stuff."

The blaster comes right back out, but I ignore her. She isn't here to shoot me. I start a wireless handshake with the three ships and then begin transmitting the scan logs and radio exchanges to the black ship first. I put in a five-minute delay to transmit to O'Shea, and a twenty-minute delay for Vlad. I message Vlad privately and warn him of bandwidth issues. Scarlett watches me the entire time. The procedure takes me longer than usual using one hand. Only now does she show some concern for my physical state.

"Still beating yourself up, huh?"

"Ha," I say. "Grav panel issues."

She snorts like she doesn't believe me. I fish the bounty flyer out of my waistband and hold it out it to her. "Fifty million creds," I point out.

Scarlett laughs and waves it away. "I got a copy. And I'm worth more than that. *You're* worth more than that."

"I don't want any part of this."

"You think you get to choose?" Scarlett laughs. And now I can't remember if I liked her or hated her back in the day. It was my first tour on the ground. I've blocked a lot of that out.

She laughs some more and shakes her head. "You don't want any part of this. Tell your parents that. The day they screwed in the back seat of some car in Kentucky, they put you here. Right here." She aims the blaster at the floor, like she's indicating the beacon.

I watch as one of the ships outside peels away toward the asteroid field.

"Tennessee," I say, correcting her.

"Whatever."

“Yeah, well, I think I do have a choice. I came out here to get away from the war—”

“News flash,” Scarlett says, cutting me off. “The war’s coming to you, Bub. You’re on the front lines.”

“This is *not* the front lines,” I say. She knows this isn’t the front lines. I don’t care what my dreams tell me, what the shakes mean, the things I see and hear when I’m alone. The war isn’t here. It can’t be. This is a different war on my beacon, between just me and my demons.

“Every square inch of this galaxy is a front line,” Scarlett says. “It’s just a matter of when. But it doesn’t have to be like that—”

Not this. I think I remember now that I mostly didn’t like Scarlett. It’s the narrow eyes. The way they think they see something that isn’t there. Conspiratorial eyes. But she stands up and moves like a cat across the module and stands close enough to me that I can smell how clean she is, this little pocket of freshness in the dank and dark, and I want to kiss her. I want to grab something beautiful and hold it and weep and smother it with affection so that maybe it won’t ever leave me. And that’s when I remember that I didn’t like Scarlett Mulhenry at all. And I didn’t hate her either. I think I loved her.

“Why are you here?” I ask, and I feel like I have to shout it, but it comes out a whisper, like my nightmare voice.

“I want you to end this war,” Scarlett says.

Her eyes widen for a moment.

I can see in them.

I can see that she’s dead serious.

• 4 •

I remember kids who thought they could end wars. Hell, I remember *being* one of those kids. Neighborhoods have always been full of them, running around with plastic blasters and blowing the heads off Ryph, pretending we're shooting the last shot in the war, bringing it all to a heroic end. When we're young, every imaginary battle ends with heroics. Finales come with a bang. Then you get older, and you see that life ends in wrinkles and whimpers.

Looking at Scarlett now, as she looks at me, and her ridiculous words about ending wars hang in the air, I remember more than just the fact that I loved her once; I almost remember what it *felt* like. I almost feel it again. Love comes as fast as shrapnel in the trenches. It's indiscriminate. It gets whoever's closest. When it's your time, it's your time. They assign someone to the bunk beside you, and it's like a grenade landing in your lap.

I vaguely remember what I felt like before the war took my hope, and I vaguely remember what Scarlett was like before the war did something screwy with hers.

"I don't have room for your dreams," I tell her. "You shouldn't have come here. I don't know how we'll get you out, but I'll help you do that. It's a capital offense, but I'll help you. Maybe the next trader —"

"I'm not leaving here without you," she says. "A friend will come for me. For us both. Someone you know—"

I wave her silent and take a step back, like she really is a bomb that might go off. "Scarlett, I can't leave here." And then I say what I've known for a while but haven't told anyone at NASA, haven't even admitted to myself, not out loud. "I'm never leaving here," I say. "It's a two-year, but I'll re-up. This is like the army, except I'll last longer. This is where I belong."

She looks me up and down. Frowns. Her eyes glisten. "This isn't you," she says.

"It is," I tell her. And I nearly tell her my secret. My dark one. She always got the truth out of me in the past, but never without a fight. I change the subject in a hurry. Any kind of crazy is better than my kind. "So how do you think you can end this war?"

Scarlett adjusts the small pack slung over her shoulder. She pulls out a weathered paperback. Holds it up so I can see the cover.

"You've read this?" she asks.

The book is *Salaman's Battle.* It's part of the *Frontier Saga* by T.W. Rudolf. Of course I've read it. It's trench pulp, and practically required reading for grunts. We pass these novels around like VD. I read the

entire series until the pages turned to mud and the spines fell apart.

"Sure," I say. I smile. "Are we going to take out the Lord hive with a planet buster like Corporal Charlie Sikes does in book twelve?" I say this with the lilt and enthusiasm of a twelve-year-old planning the next stage of the neighborhood invasion from behind Mrs. Wilkerson's petunias.

"How much do you know much about Rudolf?" Scarlett asks, clearly not amused.

I shrug my one good shoulder. "I probably scanned the back of a book or two." Even before she turns the tattered paperback around, I can already see T.W.'s bald head, the fatigues he's always wearing, and that angry I-served-in-the-military-so-buy-my-book-I've-seen-the-real-shit scowl.

"There's no such person," Scarlett says. "He's as much a fiction as his stories."

I raise my hand like I'm in class. "So we expose the conspiracy, and the war ends!"

"The person behind T.W. Rudolf is a former marine intelligence officer named Porter Mencius. Porter was the numero uno translator for the armed forces during the Orion Offensive."

"I'm still not getting it—"

"These are repurposed Ryph novels, is what I'm trying to tell you."

This takes my brain a few moments. Scarlett waits patiently.

"Bullshit," I say, when I realize what she's suggesting. "You're saying someone translated Ryph novels, and that's what we've been reading? But we kick the Ryph's asses in those books. In the end, I mean. Right after it looks hopeless and all."

Scarlett does a dogfighting maneuver in the air, twisting one hand after the book. "They switch everything around," she says. "We become them. They become us." Now the book is chasing her hand. "He changed a few other details, of course. What happened is, Porter fell in love with the original stories in translation, even fell for the Ryph a little, and he figured he could make a quick buck. What were the Ryph going to do, sue him? They were already trying to kill us all. He just had to change the names and which side was which."

I think back on some of those books, many of which I read half a dozen times. Something is trying to fit together in my mind when Scarlett gives me a nudge.

"Don't you see? *We're* the alien horde."

She gives me a moment to let this to sink in. It doesn't quite.

"When someone told me who the author was, and where these books came from, I went and checked a few other races we've made contact with. The Hoko, the Tryndians, the Capricorns. Guess what?

They all have a long and rich popular culture dealing with alien invasions. Every one of them. And it all starts about the time each race put something into orbit for the first time."

"Okay," I say, seeing this point at least. "That makes sense. We're all scared shitless out here. It's a scary place."

"It's worse than that. Don't you see? We fear what we know we'll become. As soon as we can go out, we start worrying about something heading our way. To the Ryph, we're everything they thought we'd be. And we think the same of them."

"But they are. Look at what happened on Delphi."

"And *they* say look what happened on Arcturus. And we say Delphi happened first. And they say Arcturus was worse. And both sides are run by fear. You know why?"

I nod. "Sure. Because fear is how you hedge your bets. If you're wrong, you wiped out some friendlies. Oops. But if you're right, you saved your ass and all of humanity's."

"No, that's not why. It's because fear sells. It's because war is sport. And it's also very good business. We warred with ourselves until we found someone to war with together."

"Well, there you go," I say, snapping my fingers. "There's no stopping it. So why try? Look at me—" I wave my arm at the beacon. "I'm the hero because I checked out."

"That's exactly right," Scarlett says. "The problem is, you didn't take the rest of us with you."

•••

I have no idea what Scarlett means by this, but all the crazy talk has me thirsty. Or I just want something to occupy my free hand. I cross to the small sink by the lounge and pour Scarlett a water, then I drink from the tap. I hand her a food pack as well. I don't have any appetite, but I grab one for myself. Tearing the pack open with my teeth, I squeeze some of the protein paste into my mouth. It tastes better heated up, but the army taught me not to care.

"Tell me what you remember from that last day," Scarlett says. I notice she's eyeing the nasty knot of scars that peeks out from under my slinged arm. I haven't seen her or talked to her in years. She shouldn't know a damn thing about that day. Then I remember she tracked me here by hacking navy files. She knows the same bullshit story they know.

"More than I care to," I tell her, chewing the paste and fighting to swallow.

"I want to hear about it. And not what's in the reports. Tell me

what really happened."

I turn away from her, finish the paste, and throw the packet in the recycler. Staring out the porthole, I can see one of the ships moving through the asteroid belt. There's the second ship. No sign of the ninja, which makes me smile.

"We pushed into the hive on Yata. Our platoon was pinned down. As was Echo company. Everyone in my squad ate it. That left me in charge. I was going to set off the nuke, wipe out the whole hive—"

I stop right there. I've never told this next part to anyone. Why do I do this for her?

"What happened?" she asks.

I stare out the porthole.

Scarlett takes a step toward me. I can hear her picking her way carefully through the debris scattered everywhere. She was always good at this, picking through the debris. When her hand lands on my good shoulder, I flinch, which feels like a knife slipping between my ribs.

"I know what happened," she whispers. "I just want you to admit it."

I look down at the floor. My eyes are watering. I blink that shit away.

"I didn't do it," I say. "My finger was on the button, but I didn't do it. Couldn't do it."

"You didn't set off the bomb," she says. "And next thing you know, a Ryph Lord is standing over you."

I nod. My voice would crack if I tried to use it. I feel my hand trembling. Scarlett's hand is still resting on my shoulder, burning me there.

"And he opened you up," she says. Her hand drifts down my bruised ribs and touches my stomach. My scars. I haven't been touched in so long. I'd forgotten what it feels like. I nod.

"And then you killed him, and their entire army fled the battlefield, and you saved the day."

"Yes," I whisper, lying through my teeth, pretending my account of things was how they really were.

"But you didn't kill him, did you?"

I shake my head. Tears roll down my cheeks.

"You didn't do shit."

I nod. I can feel her breasts pressing against my back.

"Why didn't you set off that bomb?" she asks me.

I don't say anything. I just concentrate on her hand. I place mine on the back of hers, holding it there.

"Because of the company you would've lost?" she asks.

"No," I whisper.

“Why, then?”

I can’t say.

“Tell me. C’mon, soldier, just spit it out. I know it’s right there. The truth is on the tip of your tongue.”

I don’t want to say.

“Tell me why you didn’t do it,” she commands.

And my will shatters. Maybe because of her touch. So I tell her the truth.

“Because of the hive,” I whisper, barely loud enough for anyone to hear. “I couldn’t do it because of the hive.”

• 5 •

The radio squawks. I can't tell how long we've been standing there, in a fog of my admission, her arm wrapped around me, her hand on my flesh, my hand pressed against hers. Felt like forever. Wasn't long enough.

"Son of a raped pig, do you read?"

"Fuck off, Vladimir."

I turn to look at Scarlett, who has pulled away from me at this intrusion by the HF.

"It's two of the bounty hunters," I say.

"No shit," she says.

"How many cats you have in bag right now?" Vlad asks.

"Speak English," O'Shea radios back.

"Bounties. How many in ship? I find it hard to believe you make two bounty like this, but I'm going through ship scans, and I see three warm on ship of yours, and I know you have no friends, no girlfriend. So how you get so lucky, boy of bacon?"

"That's Vladimir," I say. "Eastern European, I think."

"I know who he is," Scarlett says.

"I don't know what you're talking about, asshole. What bounties? It's just me and my warthen, Cricket, on this ship."

There's a pause in the communications. My brain goes to where Vlad's brain is going. Three signatures on O'Shea's ship when he arrived, and now only two. Plus, I have the advantage of already knowing the answer. I'm standing beside the answer.

"Shit," Scarlett says. "You sent them all the scans?"

"I had to," I say.

"Yeah, but of their ships as well?"

I shrug. I can almost hear the rock hanging around my neck say: *Dumbass.*

"I'm looking at the scans right now," O'Shea radios to Vlad. *"This don't make no sense."*

"Of course it does, you spawn of a molested sow. You brought her here."

"Fuck," Scarlett says. She fishes into her bag.

"Yeah, let's read a paperback to them," I say. I can already see the two of us in jail together. Unless she wants to say she had a blaster on me the entire time. She would do that for me. No point in both of us going to prison.

Scarlett pulls something out of her bag. "I really don't want to do this, but ending the war is worth more lives than have ever been spilled."

I see what's in her hand. It's a remote detonator. She already has the little clear guard flipped up to expose the silver switch.

"What're you doing?" I ask.

She steps toward the porthole and peers out at the asteroid field. Her body has gone tense. Her shoulders are riding up around her neck. I step toward her, reach out my one good hand.

"I'm sorry," she says.

I hear a faint click. Out in the debris field, an orange cloud blooms like a flower on high-speed film.

"What did you do?"

I think of that animal in its cage. I think of the way it looked at me, water streaming from its jowls. It's strange that I think of the animal before I think of O'Shea. Maybe it's the cage. Maybe I have some affinity for helpless things.

"Vlad was not a good guy," Scarlett says. "He's with the mob. Has done horrible things to decent people."

"Vlad?" I ask. "I thought you came here with O'Shea."

Scarlett crosses the room and stares at one of my screens. "I did. But I only had one bomb. And I kinda like Mitch. I mean, he's a dick, and he's dumb as a sack of sand, but he's not evil."

"What about the kid?" I ask, thinking of the boy who looked at me through his bangs. "What about Vlad's bounty?"

Scarlett turns and looks at me. I can tell she never saw the boy. Probably placed the bomb on the ceiling of Vlad's airlock, right inside the door while we were in the cockpit. It's what I would've done. She doesn't say anything, doesn't ask me about the kid, just swallows this information as she turns back to the monitors.

"Now where's that other ship?" she asks. "And Mitch is going to be on his way. We'll have to get ready for that."

"Beacon 23, Sanity's Edge. *Come in."*

"Shit," I say. "I've got to get that." I cross over to the HF. Scarlett grabs the mic before I can and squeezes the transmit button to talk to O'Shea. She must've already considered the ruse of commandeering the beacon and saving my ass.

"You've got two minutes to spin up your drive and scoot," she says. "In two minutes, I blow your ship." Narrowing her eyes, she stares out a porthole. "And don't come any closer, asshole."

I turn and follow her gaze; I see the bounty hunter's ship heading our direction.

"Bullshit," O'Shea says. *"You woulda already done it."*

"I'll kill this beacon operator, then." She lifts an eyebrow at me. Smiles.

"Fifty million in cold hard cash," O'Shea says. *"I'll shoot him* for *you."*

“Motherfucker,” I say. Scarlett cradles the mic. Is obviously thinking. “That blaster of yours is all we got,” I tell her. “There aren’t any weapons here. There are two of them out there. And my lifeboat can’t go hyper.”

“Can we lock them out?” she asks.

“They’ve got warrants. I know how to override the airlocks to open them in an emergency, but no way to keep them closed, not if they have marshal IDs. I mean, if I had a few hours to really dig into it I could figure something out.”

“Then we get the jump on them,” she says. “We get down there and wait.”

I stare at the radio. O’Shea hasn’t said a thing since offering to shoot me dead. I think about that animal on his boat, did he say it was a warthen? He could probably turn that thing loose on us and just smoke a cigar and wait for the screaming to stop. I pull out the bounty sheet and unfold it. Study the fine print. “Fifteen mil just for locating you,” I say. “He doesn’t even have to come in here. He’ll just call it in and wait for the cavalry. You shouldn’t have come for me. What were you thinking?”

Scarlett ignores this last bit. Instead she says, “I know Mitch. For an extra thirty-five mil, he’s coming in. We should get down there.”

She heads toward the ladder. I feel like pointing out that it might take him an extra fifteen minutes to dock. But I see out the porthole that he’s hauling ass our way. And we’ve got fifty-six rungs between us and the lock collars. Before I hurry after Scarlett, I de-energize the two free collars. He should be able to use his credentials for an override, but it’ll take a few moments before he figures out he needs to.

Scarlett is down the first ladder and on to the second before I even get started. I barely feel my sprained ankle thanks to the rush of adrenaline, but the arm is still useless. I go down gingerly, remembering the time I slipped off a rung, caught my chin on the ladder, and nearly bit clear through my tongue. In my living quarters, I grab a blanket and a shirt and throw them down the next ladder. More rungs. I can feel O’Shea getting close. I can hear Scarlett below, calling for me to hurry. In the next module, I grab a roll of duct tape from where I was working on my project earlier that day. Was it just that day? Seems like forever ago. Time flies with company. I toss the blanket, shirt, and tape down the last ladder and start my last descent.

“What’s this?” Scarlett calls out, as the items rain down.

“Didn’t you see that thing on his ship? This is so it doesn’t chew us in half.” I reach the bottom of the ladder, grab the shirt, and try wrapping it around my forearm with my teeth. Scarlett sees what I’m after and does it for me, holstering the blaster. She uses the duct tape

to secure the wrap, tearing the tape with her teeth. It's strange, but I want to kiss her right then. Maybe just in case anything happens.

"I was thinking maybe we could bag it with the blanket," I say. "If I was him, I'd send it through the door first. Try and scare us shitless."

There's a bang against the beacon. Fuck. He's already here. I hear a screech and a scrape as he tries to get a lock. But without the electromagnets engaged, there's no grab. It's taking longer for him to figure that out than I thought.

"You take the blaster," Scarlett says, pushing the pistol into my left hand. "I've got two hands for the blanket. Besides, you're a better shot."

"Not with this hand, I'm not."

But she's already got the blanket and is positioning herself beside airlock Bravo, which is where the scraping seems to be emanating from. I glance over at my walk suit, wishing I had time to put it on. I feel unprotected. Like a raw and open wound. And then I hear the collar buzz as O'Shea figures out he needs the override. I also see that I'm a criminal now. Without even considering the alternative, I'm sitting here, ready to blast away at a bounty hunter on legal marshal business. There's a bounty sheet tucked in my waistband. It's for a girl I had sex with a few times amid the fury of war, someone who just happened to be in my squad for half a tour, who is obviously batshit crazy, and who has probably done a lot of illegal stuff, like hacking into navy databases and tracking me down. And I'm just throwing my life and my career away for her? What the hell am I doing?

I look down and realize I'm holding the blaster. Fifty mil. I could sit in miserable solitude on an island in sector one for the rest of my life. I could contemplate my black thoughts every day in paradise. Just need to slide the barrel to the right, away from the door, and onto a woman I once loved.

But the barrel doesn't waver. Not a fraction of an inch. I don't contemplate this thing so much as marvel over the fact that I'm *not* contemplating it. I marvel that I'm so quick to choose the wrong side. This is my legacy, choosing the wrong side. Scarlett knows. She knew before she got here. It's why she came. She knows I didn't set off that bomb on Yata because I couldn't kill all those unborn Ryph. How did she know? How does she know I never killed the Lord who gutted me? Why is she here if she knows I'm a traitor? A traitor with medals and a big fat lie.

The light over the airlock goes green. Holy hell, we're taking on a bounty hunter. Maybe he's as big an idiot as he seems. Or as bad a shot as he is a pilot. The inner door slides open. I crouch behind the ladder, for a little protection and to rest my forearm on a rung and

steady my aim. Scarlett is coiled like a spring by the door. As soon as it opens, I see the animal. I can't shoot. I yell instead for Scarlett to *DO IT!* and the blanket twirls in front of the warthen. There's a mad shriek from the animal as it gets tangled up. Scarlett yells for me to shoot it, then something bounces into the room and there's a blinding flash and a deafening roar.

I lose my footing and stumble back from the blast, covering my eyes, but it's too late. I can't see. I fire a shot toward what I hope is the door, and the blaster kicks in my hand. I hear the sizzle of a bolt striking steel. A miss. The world is a red haze with black splotches. A form appears in front of me. Someone grabbing me. Taking the blaster away. It's over.

"Get down," Scarlett says. She's beside me. It's her with the gun. My vision is clearing, and I hear a blaster go off—a bolt strikes the ladder near my hand, the metal sizzling against my palm. I dive to the side as another round hits nearby. I think Scarlett and Mitch are firing at each other. The animal's muffled shrieks tell me it's still tangled. When my vision clears, I see Scarlett holding her arm, smoke rising from a charred wound, Mitch using the airlock as cover and firing at her, and the animal getting free, shaking off the blanket, and crouching as it prepares to lunge.

"Fifty mil alive or dead," O'Shea yells around the corner. "Your choice which."

He sees me and narrows his eyes. He knows. Knows I'm on the wrong side. I can see the headline: *Hero Betrays Federation; Abets Known Terrorist.* Mitch raises his gun at me as the warthen uncoils with a growl and launches toward Scarlett.

I don't know why I think to do this, what part of my subconscious is yelling at me to jump, but it's some part that knows Mitch O'Shea is not a good pilot and probably spends no time away from gravity, that he has a weak stomach. I've only got one good ankle and one free arm, but it's enough. I leap. The blaster round misses. I hit the kill switch taped to the ceiling. The panels in the floor are shut off. Gravity goes away all at once.

O'Shea lurches and retches as his organs spring up inside him. The warthen glances off Scarlett, and both go rebounding. The animal's shriek turns into a confused whimper. O'Shea is turned around and cartwheeling in the airlock. I worry about him getting to his ship, where the grav panels are still on. Grabbing the ladder as I rebound from my jump, I brace my feet against one of the rungs and coil my legs. I've done this a thousand times down the weightless arm to the GWB, barely needing to course correct against the wall. I don't have a gun, but I'm a bullet. Shoving both legs straight, I take off with terrible speed. O'Shea sees me. Tries to swing his blaster around, but it

sends him spinning the other way. A bolt lances past me. I crash into him, knocking his air out. But I send us both toward his open ship and gravity.

Mitch goes through first and is sucked toward the deck, lands with a clatter and a clang. All that gear. I land on my shoulder and feel it pop back out. The world turns white for a moment, stars blooming and then receding in flashing streaks. Something rolls across the deck. Something round. O'Shea levels his blaster at me. I roll as far from him and the loose grenade as I can. There's a blast, a flash of heat against my face, and I think for a second that I've been shot. But when I look his way, I see O'Shea is mangled. Killed by his own grenade knocked loose in the fall. His body reminds me of so many of my friends. The lifeless, confused gaze, staring off into the distance. They all look the same. Like there's nothing to see there.

• 5 •

Back through the airlock, I embrace the weightlessness. I can't imagine what Mitch felt when the gravity went off. Even when you're used to it, when you feel it a dozen times a day, every time I go down to the GWB to get a buzz, there's that odd sensation of every nerve in my body going from a downward tug to . . . nothing. Like cresting a hill in a speeding car. Or nosing down in atmo. The vertigo is intense if you're not used to it. For poor Mitch O'Shea, it was his end.

The warthen is twisting and howling in the zero g. I see Scarlett bracing in the corner of the room, a few feet off the floor, taking aim with her blaster.

"Wait!" I shout.

The blanket is hovering above the deck. I gather it on my trajectory toward the ladder. There's all kinds of debris floating about. My walk suit. Tools. The roll of tape. I send the blanket floating toward Scarlett, and it moves like a wraith through the air. She gathers it. "We just need to get it through the airlock," I tell her.

She nods. Knows I need this. Knows me well enough. The blaster is holstered. I pull myself up the ladder with my free hand. The pain in my shoulder and ankle are distant, muffled like my hearing from the shock grenade and the explosive blast. The cat is whimpering. Doesn't seem so ferocious now. Scarlett opens the blanket and kicks off toward the animal, manages to take it from the back. I push off and hit the switch on the ceiling, bracing myself for the fall. There's a clang as the tools hit the deck, and then a series of *oomph*s as the three of us follow suit. If my ankle wasn't broken before, it feels like it now.

Scarlett looks to have landed on the animal, which is lying still. Barely moving. She drags it in a bundle of fabric toward the airlock, wrestles it through. I limp over and key the door. Before it slides shut, I see the warthen extricate itself and dash off into the ship. The fight is out of her. Or maybe without a master to obey, she has no target. Either way, she's trapped on the ship until I figure out what to do.

I sag against the wall, exhausted. Scarlett tries to catch me. My shoulder screams out. My foot won't take any weight. Her hands are on me, her face so close, her lips so familiar, my mind still stunned and racing. She starts to say something, starts to thank me, to tell me she loves me, that we can end all wars, that we can make life, have children, move to sector one, be heroes together—

When her eyes widen in pain. And I see inside those windows into her soul, and I see that she is a good person, deep down, just as the life leaves her. Just before her body sags against mine, nothing left to animate it.

Stepping through airlock Charlie is the bounty hunter in black. She has a whisper gun in her hand. It's pointed right at me. A woman I loved is in my arms, dead. I'm next. I know this with all the certainty of gravity planetside.

The bounty hunter walks to within a pace of me. I'm half pinned under Scarlett's weight and half pinned by my injuries. I can't move. I can't even resist. I've wanted to be dead for so long that I open my arms to the concept, to the idea of not existing. I want it. I feel my entire being open up to the cosmos, wanting all of it to pour inside me, for the emptiness to fill me up, to burst me back into the atoms I'm made of, to be the tinsel and debris of that cargo, all scattered through space, unknowing and unfeeling.

The bounty hunter pulls the blaster from Scarlett's holster and flings it across the module. She grabs Scarlett by the collar and pulls her off me. The woman in black is fiercely strong. She keeps the whisper gun aimed at my head as she drags Scarlett across the deck and through the airlock.

The door closes.

I never heard her come. I barely hear her leave. A light goes from green to red above the door. Scarlett is gone, and I haven't been arrested, haven't been killed, and I'm angry as hell. Depressed and angry as hell and full of conviction. *Conviction.* The missing ingredient. The energy to do it. To finally do it. And nearby, an animal that wants to kill me. So it's not my weak-ass hands refusing to pull the trigger.

I work my way shakily to my feet. Need to do this before I change my mind. Need to embrace my dark secret, the desire to be ended, the unwhisperable, or they'll lock you away. I key open the airlock to O'Shea's ship. "Come and get me!" I shout. The remains of the warthen's owner are ten paces away. I stumble through the airlock, toward the ship, hoping to be eaten. The animal turns the corner, and I brace for a world of searing pain, of claw and tooth, of white-hot mercy, but I just feel it brush against me. I open my eyes, didn't realize I'd closed them, and turn to see a tail whisk around the corner. I stumble back into the module, confused. The warthen has a food pack in its mouth. It goes to my walk suit, which is back to a heap on the floor, turns twice in a circle on it, and lies down, chewing on the pack, protein paste going everywhere.

All of this is sensed at a distance. I'm too focused on my dark secret. My new conviction. I hobble toward the other airlock, where Scarlett disappeared. I key open the outer door, step inside the lock, and shut the door behind me. In the tight confines, I think I can smell her. She just passed through here. Was alive moments ago. Now is dead and gone. Her hope has been wiped from the universe.

I wanted to tell her my dark secret. I was so close. More time together, and I would've confessed. I would've told her how I come here every night before I go to sleep, how I stand in one of these airlocks, how I close the door behind me, and how I think about the vacuum of space on the other side.

Every night, I do this.

Without fail.

There's an emergency override code that'll open this door even if there's no atmo on the other side. It's for going on space walks. We're supposed to do one every day. I never have. I only come in here with my suit off. To breathe my last. To end the nightmare.

Leaning against the wall, I enter the first three digits of the override code.

My finger hovers over the fourth.

I've done this every day I've been here. Every single day. But this time I want it. I can't go on.

Three numbers sit on the little screen, waiting.

I touch the fourth.

I touch it, but I can't press it.

I never can.

I sag to the ground, sobbing and broken, hugging my knees.

Bad things come in threes—but then they stop.

And start all over again.